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Medication Overuse in Mental Health Facilities: Not the Answer, Regardless of Consent

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From *Medscape*: "There's a growing scandal in mental health care. Recent studies are showing that certain medications that basically are used to, if you will, quiet patients — antipsychotic drugs — are being overused, particularly in facilities that serve poorer people and people who are minorities. This situation is utterly, ethically unacceptable and it's something that we are starting to get really pressed to solve.

Part of this is due to the fact that numbers of caregivers are in short supply. We need to get more people trained. We need to get more mental health providers at all levels into facilities in order to provide care, and not substitute that inability to have a provider present and minimize risk to patients by having drug-induced sleepiness, soporific behavior, or, if you will, snowing them just because we don't have enough people to keep an eye on them. Furthermore, we can't let them engage in some activities, even things like walking around, because we're worried about falls. The nursing homes or mental health facilities don't want anybody to get injured, much less killed, because that's going to really bring government agencies down on them.

What do we do, aside from trying to get more numbers in there? California came up with a law not too long ago that basically put the burden of using these drugs on consent. They passed a law that said the patient, before going under and being administered any type of psychoactive drug, has to consent; or if they're really unable to do that, their relative or next of kin should have to consent.

California law now puts the burden on getting consent from the patient in order to use these drugs. It's not a good solution. It still permits the use of the drugs to substitute for the inability to provide adequate numbers of people to provide care in safe environments. It's almost like saying, 'We know you're going into a dangerous place. We can't really reduce the danger, so we're going to make sure that you stay in your seat. You better consent to that because otherwise things could not go well for you in this mental institution.'"

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